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A lot of kids still aren't ready for kindergarten: What suburban districts are doing about it

By: Madhu Krishnamurthy



Kris Young from the YWCA helps Nadaly Vriostegvi, 6, of Elgin pick out a book during a free summer lunch program at Izaak Walton Center in Elgin. Data show that statewide only 26% of students entering kindergarten are developmentally ready, according to a state report, so school districts are working on ways to help.



Children look over a collection of books available after participating in a free summer lunch program Tuesday at Izaak Walton Center in Elgin. Elgin Area School District U-46 is helping provide the books and learning activities to get more children kindergarten ready.



Rosalee Sanchez of Elgin reads to her son Luis, 3, after eating lunch Tuesday during a free summer lunch program at Izaak Walton Center in Elgin. The books and learning activities were provided by Elgin Area School District U-46 and its partners to promote early learning.



Nadaly Vriostegvi, 6, of Elgin picks out a book during a free summer lunch program at Izaak Walton Center in Elgin.



Some of the books available during a free summer lunch program at Izaak Walton Center in Elgin. A report released Tuesday shows that only 26% of kindergartners surveyed statewide last fall demonstrated readiness in all three of a trio of key development areas.

This July, Bensenville School District 2 is launching a three-day "jump-start" camp for incoming kindergartners before the school year starts.

"They just need a little boost before they get into the actual kinder program," said Kay Dugan, assistant superintendent.

14 required kindergarten readiness measures

Approaches to learning and self-regulation

- Curiosity and initiative in learning
- Self-control of feelings and behavior
- Engagement and persistence

Social and emotional development

- Relationships and social interactions with familiar adults
- Relationships and social interactions with peers

Language and literacy development

- Communication and use of language (expressive)
- Reciprocal communication and conversation

- Comprehension of age-appropriate text
- Phonological awareness
- Letter and word knowledge

Cognition: Math

- Classification
- Number sense of quantity
- Number sense of math operations
- Shapes

Source: Illinois State Board of Education

It's an example of what some suburban school districts are doing to help students be better prepared for kindergarten from Day One, and the need for such innovations is evident in a state report on student readiness released Tuesday.

Offering a snapshot of student readiness, the Illinois State Board of Education's second [Kindergarten Individual Development Survey, or KIDS](#), virtually repeated a conclusion from its first. Despite a slight improvement, still only about one in four Illinois children enter kindergarten fully ready to learn.

The survey examines developmental readiness in three primary categories: social and emotional development, mathematics and language and literacy.

Across suburban school districts, overall readiness levels differ vastly, according to the survey, from as low as 1% considered prepared in all three areas at Mundelein Elementary District 75 to as high as 58% in Wheaton-Warrenville Unit District 200.

At Bensenville District 2, 4% of incoming kindergartners met all three developmental measures. They did considerably better in social and emotional development, 40%, and language and literacy, 35%, than in math, 6%.

Dugan noted improvements shown in the district's social-emotional learning and literacy scores and attributed them to targeted efforts made with the preschool population over the past two years. As part of a partnership with the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL](#), and [Mindful Practices](#), district teachers were taught strategies for engaging students and parents through peace circles and techniques for negotiation.

"What we learned was the social-emotional understanding for teachers was really important," Dugan said.

The district has increased the number of teachers making home visits to provide families with additional support and expanded its pre-K program for at-risk students, serving 160 students in the last school year. Now, officials are turning their attention to improving math scores.

"We want our coaches to be working with the kindergarten and pre-K teachers to make sure we are not missing things in mathematics in our curriculum," Dugan said. "KIDS really has been a breath of fresh air. It really is very helpful for planning in our school district. We've got opportunities to turn situations around."

Reaching families

Increasing access to early learning opportunities for minority groups before they begin kindergarten is critical, say educators at the state's second-largest school district, Elgin Area School District U-46, which educates roughly 2,500 students in full-day kindergarten.

"This really is a community issue," said Peggy Ondera, U-46 director of early learners initiatives. "What are we as a community doing to make sure our children are coming to kindergarten prepared and ready to succeed?"

Of 2,354 kindergartners assessed last fall, 16% were prepared upon starting school -- an increase from 10% the previous year. U-46 also saw increases in readiness across the board: social-emotional development went from 36% to 42%; math went from 16% to 23%; and language and literacy went from 28% to 31%.

Over the past year, the district has increased efforts to promote early learning in partnership with Alignment Collaborative for Education, the Elgin Partnership for Early Learning, Gail Borden Public Library, Elgin Township and the Greater Elgin Family Care Center. The goal is encouraging families to read with their children and educating them about language and concept development through practicing the five essentials: talk, play, read, do and write.

The district has placed materials to engage families in "nontraditional spaces," such as laundromats, child-care facilities, grocery stores, community parks, food pantries and waiting rooms of doctors offices. It also has secured several grants to make the campaign more visible and placed book baskets at various community locations.

"We're really trying to take the learning to where the families are," Ondera said. "We want families to understand how important those first 2,000 days (of life) are. We continue to focus our efforts on where we can make an impact prior to (kids) entering kindergarten."

Since KIDS measures a different group of students entering kindergarten each year, it's harder to show cause for why or how kids might be doing better, said David Wilm, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction for Wauconda Unit District 118.

District 118 had 260 students in a half-day kindergarten program, of whom nearly 10% measured ready in all three developmental areas last fall compared to 3% in 2017-18. The district fared better in literacy, 54%, and social-emotional development, 33%, than math, 18%.

Wilm said the district's early childhood coordinator has been working closely with local preschool providers to "adjust their programs" and improve readiness. Additional classroom interventions and supports help close the achievement gap for those students still unprepared, he said.

"Our teachers are really working hard. They know the standards that are expected in kindergarten. This data gives us where the students are starting, but really what's more important is where they finish," Wilm said.

Statewide inequities

KIDS is designed to help teachers, administrators, families and policymakers better understand students' strengths and where to target resources and supports.

Last fall, 115,920 kindergartners statewide were rated on 14 required measures. During the first 40 days of instruction, teachers observed students playing, doing schoolwork, having conversations and following directions, then documented their interactions and behaviors.

Statewide data show only 26% of kindergartners demonstrated readiness in all three development areas -- a 2 percentage-point increase from the previous year -- while 39% did not demonstrate readiness in any developmental area.

Also, 33% were ready in math, 46% in language and literacy, and 53% in social-emotional development.

Fewer black and Latino students met readiness bench marks than Asian and white peers. Readiness numbers also were lower for low-income students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and English language learners.

Across the board, the results show marginal improvement from the previous year.

"Systemic inequities in resources and opportunities can negatively impact the development of young children," State Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala said. "We look forward to continuing to work with lawmakers to increase the state's investments in early childhood education and close gaps in development as early as possible."

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Gehrig in charge

After year of tumult, former coach takes reins as Larkin eyes stability

By: Paul Johnson

Larkin bizarrely churned through four head football coaches in less than one calendar year, so athletic director Ethan Karolczak focused on continuity in hiring the fifth.

This month, Karolczak chose to bring back a familiar face to Larkin fans: Matt Gehrig. The Royals' coach in 2008-09 became the latest head coach at Larkin.

"I just treat every situation as its own, regardless of anything that's happened in the past," Gehrig said. "It's just a lot of us getting on the same page. Regardless of what happened in the past, we're focused on building a team for the future."

The Royals' head coaching shuffle began last year when Dragan Teonic left to take the South Elgin job. Defensive coordinator Jesus Gonzalez was promoted to head coach but was suspended in the second week of the season and never returned.

Offensive coordinator Jason Aubry took over the rest of the way. Ultimately, he got the job at Concordia-Chicago, where he will coach his son, Jaxon. Former Elmhurst College coach Ron Planz took over in February, only to change course and take the Lake Zurich job in May.

“It’s definitely unusual and pretty unprecedented,” Karolczak said. “If we didn’t set the state record for coaches in a calendar year, we’re on the leaderboard. There’s no animosity toward any of those guys. I wish all those guys well.”

Gehrig was also the head coach at Huntley for two years before becoming an assistant coach at three stops, including the last four years at South Elgin. Coincidentally, he coached under Teonic last season.

“I was at the point where I wanted to possibly become a head coach again,” Gehrig said. “It’s a good feeling. I really enjoyed coaching there the last time. I have a lot of good memories about the relationships we built and the way everybody worked toward a common goal. The biggest thing looking back is that we had an impact on the guys’ lives that played for us.”

Gehrig was on vacation when he accepted the job, so Karolczak, a former football coach and college football player, took over the opening days of camp. After Gehrig arrived, he was immediately impressed.

“It’s a testament to Matt and his organizational skills and the kids,” Karolczak said. “You can already see a change in the culture since he arrived. The numbers have steadily grown. I was excited about the hire. I’m even more excited now. He’s such an effective teacher and communicator. He understands it will be a process. He has a plan and he’s executing it.”

Gehrig knows the players have gone through a lot over the past year. Instead of dwelling on that, he’s set out to put his stamp on the program.

“All the players that were at camp when I first got there were all very attentive and receptive to the message we’re bringing to the program,” Gehrig said. “We’re in the process now of building our team concept. That’s what it takes in football.”



Matt Gehrig, right, with one of his former South Elgin players, Michael Ribando, is back as Larkin’s head coach.